VOICES OF THE FROGMOUTH AND HIS NIGHTJAR RELATIONS

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The most familiar note of the Frogmouth is a deep "Oom-oom," uttered many times, a rhythmic, pulsing sound. Mr. A. H. Mattingley, who heard it mostly on moonlit nights, estimated the number of "ooms" at 14 to 150 without cessation. (*Emu*, 1910.)

Showing the bird's outline broken up by streaks and shadows.

Our captives commenced at dusk, in response, we often thought, to the calls of wild ones. The sound penetrated the house although their enclosure was some distance away. The "Oom-oom" that came down the chimney from a wild one perched on top was eerie. Even my tame possums, who always came out at dusk, retreated into their cubby-holes when the Frogmouth commenced to call. They possibly have some cause to fear him. With his poorly developed feet he could grasp but a tiny one, but his wings, as we have seen, are powerful enough to knock a full-grown ringtail possum tumbling off the rose-arch.

The call of the baby Frogmouths, as we interpreted it, was an oft-repeated "A-woo, A-woo," with the accent on "woo." Florence Irby's pet Frogmouth made a low growling sound (*Emu*, 1927). Bushmen, too, had heard this call. Her pet's cry of alarm when annoyed was a deep, low "Too-toot," a croaking, frog-like sound. D. F. Thomson (*Emu*, 1923) records the squeaking, wailing cry of a young one when picked up, the only note it uttered. One of my captives gave a coughing, barking sound when given water from a tea-spoon; presumably this was a note of protest.

Muriel Cheney (*Emu*, 1914), who heard Frogmouth and Boobook Owl calling simultaneously and thought no one should confuse them. She described the Boobook's call as leisurely, uttered a note at a time; the Frogmouth's as a quick one, uttered seven to ten times in succession. The Boobook made a slight pause between the syllables, "Boo—book." The Frogmouth made no appreciable pause. David Fleay, in a letter to the writer (Nov., 1943), described the Frogmouth's note as a very rapid series of "oo-oo's," like the engine of a motor cycle in the distance, and its danger call as a quick, double-syllabled cry of "oo-oo," differing from the usual one. This cry, he thinks, has some resemblance to that of the Boobook Owl. He, too, thinks they would not be confused by any one who had heard both.

The Frogmouth has another call to which I have seen no reference, a call which is apparently given only under great stress of fear or annoyance, or perhaps as a *cri de coeur*. It is an eerie, hair-raising scream, which, in many years, I have heard only five times. If this is the "screaming woman" call, it would be that of a drunken harridan, such as Tony Sarg might portray. To some extent it is a blend of the Black Cockatoo's screech and the harsh note of the Crow, but far, far worse than either. The cry is uttered with wide open bill, glaring expression, and fluffed-out feathers.

Twice the cry was uttered when I caught a bird, once when he was looking down at a neighbour's pet Magpie, and once when my little dog startled it. I did not discover the cause of the fifth scream, but found the Frogmouth clinging to the wire netting of the aviary. Was there a wild bird outside? Was this his "cry of the heart"?

I recently came upon the description of a Ceylon bird-call which fits it perfectly. The Singhalese, who call it Devil-bird, regard this bird with horror, as a harbinger of evil. P. H. Gosse (1860) believed it to be the Brown Owl. The cry, according to Mr. Mitford, of the Ceylon Civil Service, is indescribable, the most appalling that can be imagined, and scarcely to be heard without shuddering. He could only compare it to a boy in torture, whose screams are being stopped by strangling, a description which fits the Great Horned Owl of North America—the "half-suppressed scream of a person suffocating or throttled."

Of the Ceylon owl Mr. Mitford says: "It has another cry, like that of a hen just caught," and this, I think, describes perfectly the scream of my Frogmouth—that harsh scream of a captured hen, which always sends me indoors.

It is possible, I think, that the Ceylon bird, which was never seen actually producing the scream, was a Nightjar, to which the Frogmouth is related, and whose notes certainly resemble some of the Frogmouth's calls.

Viscount Grey of Falloden described the churring of the Nightjar as a most soothing sound, continued for long periods without a break — quite unlike a bird-voice to one hearing it for the first time — a "continuous sound such as the hum of a threshing machine," which recalls David Fleay's comparison of the Frogmouth's call to a motor-cycle engine, and which I (Dec. 18th, 1943) likened to the rhythmic sound of a stationary steam engine. Once, however, the Falloden Nightjar gave a piercing shriek, such as Viscount Grey had never heard from any bird, a shriek that seemed to be uttered "at" him. It suggested not so much fear as loathing. This seems to imply that the horrible shriek of our Frogmouth is a family call.

Even the normal voice of the British Nightjar is compared with so many and such varied sounds that it must have an extensive repertoire. One writer describes it as like "a thin lath fixed at one end and in a state of vibration at the other," loud enough to be heard half a mile away, while another of its calls is likened to "swinging a thong in the air." Some of Shakespeare's allusions to the Screech-Owl should probably have been attributed to our Frogmouth's relative, the Nightjar.

Lenox (*Macbeth*), describing a night of horror, full of lamentations and strange screams of death, refers to the "obscure" bird which clamoured the livelong night. As the less "obscure" Owl was sometimes "seen" to utter its shriek, it was regarded as the prime bird of evil. "The owl shrieked at thy birth, an evil sign," says Henry VI to Gloster. "It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman which gives the stern'st good-night," says Lady Macbeth.

It is possible, I think, that many of those fearful night shrieks should have been attributed, not to birds, but to crepuscular and nocturnal animals, such, for instance, as the badger, whose prolonged *cri de coeur* is a most ghastly scream, "as of someone being slowly murdered" (Michael Blackmore). As the shy nocturnal badger is rarely seen, some such mystery was inevitable.

Our Echidna is said to scream shrilly. Natives of northern Australia say that it utters a wailing cry when on the prowl at night. Although I have had exceptional opportunities of watching Echidnas, day and night, I have not heard either cry. It is possibly a mating call, uttered at night, in which case few people would actually "see" it uttered. It might, indeed, be confused with the "screaming woman" bird.

Not to unleash the whole pack of horrible night screams, I think we may assume that many of them, coming from unseen nocturnal creatures, were attributed to night birds, and because of the mystery and obscurity that shrouded them they were regarded as portents of evil; a mystery that has found its way to Australia.